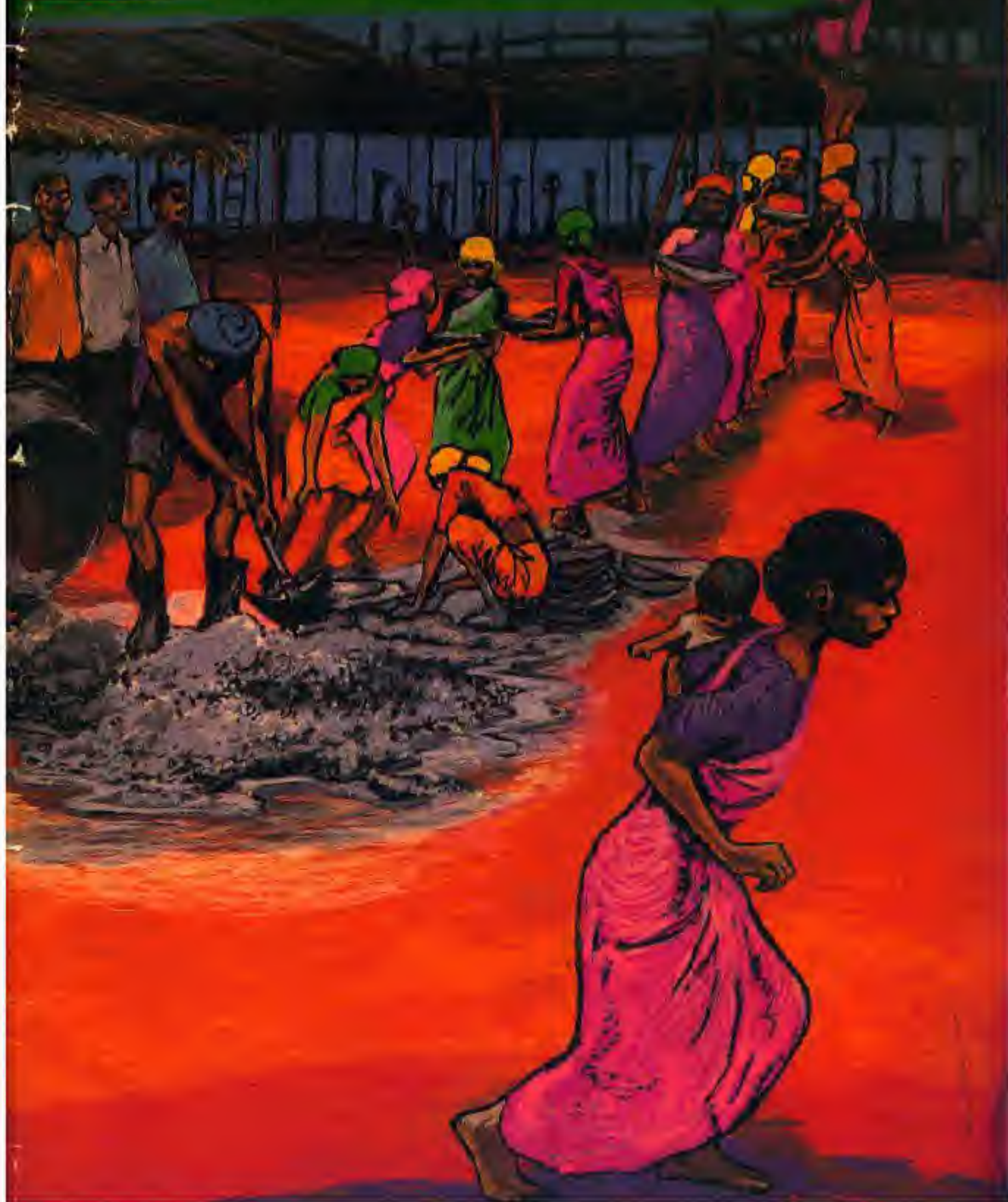


ICRA

EDUCATIONAL
SERIES NO. 2

KANTHAMMA

STORY OF A WOMAN CONSTRUCTION WORKER



THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Since the launching of the International Women's Decade in 1975, many groups committed to the cause of women have sprung up all over India. Women's issues are being discussed in various circles. Women's organisations have succeeded, to a great extent, in giving voice to the problems affecting women and influencing policy decisions. People all over the world have come to the realisation that women's liberation is central to the whole process of development and that women should become subjects and participants in the process.

Despite the proliferation of women's groups, the status and role of Indian women continues to be more or less the same. The concept of liberation has not really gripped the majority of our female population. They are still silent victims of oppression in the socio-economic field and within the family.

Struggle against discrimination of women has been going on right from the beginning. The 19th century reform movements helped to some extent to wipe out evils like female infanticide, child marriage, sati. History has also documented the militant participation of women in various political struggles like the national freedom struggle, the Telengana uprising, anti-price rise movements etc. Participation in these has led to a new consciousness among women. But it failed to bring about any qualitative change in the status of women. Subjugation of women within the family, unemployment, discrepancy in wages, illiteracy, and crimes against women are still very much part of our society.

Even after 39 years of independence less than a fifth of our female population can be called literate. The majority of them are outside the reach of formal education. The drop-outs are larger among girls. They are compelled to discontinue in favour of the boys. Women are thus deprived of a vital means of achieving independence and equality.

Unemployment is very high among women in India. According to the 1971 census, of the 264 million women in India, 107.8 million were unemployed and 15.1 million under-employed. In the case of female employment, even the constitutional directive regarding equal pay for equal work is flouted. Women workers, especially in the unorganised sector, are subjected to all sorts of exploitation and harassment at the work place. Laws regarding establishment of creches, provision of maternity benefits etc. are violated by the employers.

The institutions of marriage and family also have become means of subjugating women. Families perpetuate the value of male superiority. Women are regarded as an appendage of the husband's property. They are subjected at all phases of their lives to the whims and fancies of their male counterparts. According to the Law of Manu, "In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent". Epics, puranas, social norms and moral codes are used to reinforce the traditional image of woman as submissive and servile.

The Dowry system as it exists today has reduced marriage to a barter. Much bargaining takes place in the marriage market. Economic considerations have become the basis of human relationships. The lives of many young women are ruined because of this. The parents find it extremely difficult to meet the evergrowing demand for dowry. In recent years about 2000 women were burnt to death in Delhi alone because they could not bring enough dowry. The Dowry Prohibition Act has proved ineffective. Social legislations will help only if it is coupled with public education and awareness building.

The media in India has been projecting women as sex objects and decorative pieces. They are reduced to commodities by the advertising companies. Commercialisation of sex takes place in art and literature also, particularly in fiction and films. It evades the real issues being raised by any women's organisation.

Crimes against women like wife-beating, rape, physical and mental torture are on the increase. The landlords and the police join in assaulting harijan and tribal women.

Women are thus subjected to social, economic and cultural inequalities and oppression. An ongoing struggle in all these fields is required to bring about any change in the position of women in India. To start with, women should become conscious of their position in the present society and their potential to change it. A counter-culture as against the culture of domination and unequal relationship is to be developed.

The aim of women's movements should be to get an equal place in society. Struggles against all forms of exploitation should go hand in hand with the struggles against the root causes of the problems in the existing system. Only then, can we hope for a just society.

INTRODUCTION

KANTHAMMA is an experiential story of a woman construction worker presented in the form of an illustrated booklet.

In a country like India where the literacy rate is very low, the method of dissemination of information becomes crucial. More creative use has to be made of illustrated materials which would leave a deeper impression in the minds of the readers. This booklet is intended as a response to the current inadequacy of simple and useful material meant to raise the consciousness of women.

This is our second attempt at initiating innovative methodologies towards greater understanding of social issues. The first of the Series, **Shiva's plight — Story of a Child Worker** was well received and has inspired groups to take up the cause of child labourers.

KANTHAMMA highlights problems specific to the working women. Narrating the dreary routine of her daily existence, it raises many crucial issues confronted by women in this male-dominated and class society.

Hopefully, this booklet would open discussion on the ways and means of overcoming the obstacles hindering the socio-economic and cultural development of women. It hopes to serve women's groups and other action groups in identifying problems and formulating programmes.

This booklet could be adapted and revised in accordance with the specific needs and problems of each area.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET ?

- ★ Form women's study circles and initiate discussions on the issues raised here.
- ★ Use this as a study document to create awareness among women regarding their own problems.
- ★ Organise women's action groups to fight against specific cases of oppression.

*Send your comments, suggestions
and write for copies to:*

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Grams: "SAMSKRUTI"

KANTHAMMA

TEXT: J. N. SITA

ILLUSTRATIONS: MITHRADIR



KANTHAMMA WOKE UP WITH A START AND KNEW
IMMEDIATELY THAT SHE HAD OVERSLEPT. THE SUN WAS
UP AND THE BELLS FROM THE NEARBY CHURCH WERE
RINGING



SHE LOOKED AROUND



THE CHILDREN WERE TIGHTLY CURLED, IN SLEEP.
PARVATHI AND KANGI



AND NEXT TO HER THE BABY
THAI

SHE STEPPED OUT OF HER HOUSE. THERE WAS NO ONE AT THE TAP. USUALLY THERE WERE FIVE OR SIX WOMEN WAITING



AKKAVA' NAS THERE

WHY IS THERE
NO ONE AT THE
TAP, AKKAVA?

BECAUSE ALL YOU
WILL GET OUT OF
THAT TAP NOW IS
AN OLD NHEEZE



DIDN'T YOU HEAR THAT AUTORICKSHAW
GOING AROUND ANNOUNCING THAT THE
WATER TIMINGS HAVE BEEN CHANGED.
WE WILL ONLY GET WATER IN THE
AFTERNOONS FROM NOW ON

BUT I DON'T
REACH HOME TILL
EVENING. HOW
WILL I GET
WATER FOR
COOKING?



TRAIN THAT LAZY DAUGHTER OF YOURS
TO GET THE WATER. SHE NEEDN'T GO
TO THAT CONVENT SCHOOL. WHAT'S
THE USE ANYWAY?



BUT KANTHAMMA WAS NOT LISTENING



SHE WENT OVER IN HER MIND OTHER POSSIBILITIES OF PROCURING WATER TO COOK WITH. THE WELL IN THE CHURCH WAS FAR AWAY. THE BABY MIGHT WAKE IN THE MEANTIME. PARVATHI COULD GO BUT SHE WAS TOO SMALL TO CARRY THE BINDIGE ALL THE WAY BACK. SHE DECIDED TO GO HERSELF AND GO QUICKLY.



SHE RAN ALL THE WAY TO THE CHURCH WELL

AT THE CHURCH, FORTUNATELY THERE WAS NOONE OUTSIDE ALL INSIDE, PRAYING PROBABLY



SHE WENT TO THE WELL AND PULLED THE ROPE. THE BINDIGE FELL IN WITH A SPLASH.



KANTHAMMA RUSHED HOME, SPILLING QUITE A LOT OF WATER IN HER HASTE



AS SHE EXPECTED, THE BABY WAS AWAKE AND CRAWLING NEAR THE FIRE-PLACE!



NONE OF THE OTHERS WERE AWAKE

PARVATHI!
WAKE UP
YOU LAZY
DEVIL
WAKE UP!

SHE SHOUTED ANGRILY

NHEIV KANTHAMMA FINISHED COOKING
SHE SERVED BHAKTA FIRST



THEN SHE SERVED
PARYATHI AND KANGI

SHE PUT A LITTLE FOOD
INTO A SMALL TIFFIN BOX
FOR BHAKTA TO TAKE TO WORK



SHE FED THE
BABY SOME RAGI—
TOOK A LITTLE FOR
HERSELF TOO
THEN RUSHED OFF
TO WORK



KANTHAMMA BROKE INTO A RUN
WHEN SHE LEFT THE HOUSE.
SHE WAS ALREADY LATE.



SHE COULD NOT SEE ANY OF
THE OTHERS AT THE PLACE
WHERE THE TEMPO USUALLY
STOPPED

IF SHE MISSED THE TEMPO SHE WOULD HAVE TO PAY THE BUS
FARE - AND GET A SHOUT
FROM THE CONTRACTOR.



YES, SHE HAD
MISSED THE TEMPO

KANTHAMMA WAITED FOR THE BUS. MEANWHILE THE CITY WAS COMING ALIVE. THERE SEEMED TO BE SO MANY WOMEN, ALL RUSHING TO WORK



HOW DO THEY
MANAGE TO LOOK SO FREE AND
GET TO WORK WITHOUT TAKING
THEIR LITTLE CHILDREN
WITH THEM

BUT SHE KNEW THEY HAD
SERVANTS TO HELP THEM
SHE HAD BEEN A DOMESTIC
SERVANT HERSELF ONCE

AT LAST THE BUS CAME.



SHE SCRAMBLED ON.





WORK HAD ALREADY BEGUN, ROWS
OF WOMEN AND MEN WERE PASSING
BUNDLES OF CEMENT TO EACH OTHER
ALONG A LINE. NO ONE NOTICED HER
AS SHE WENT PAST

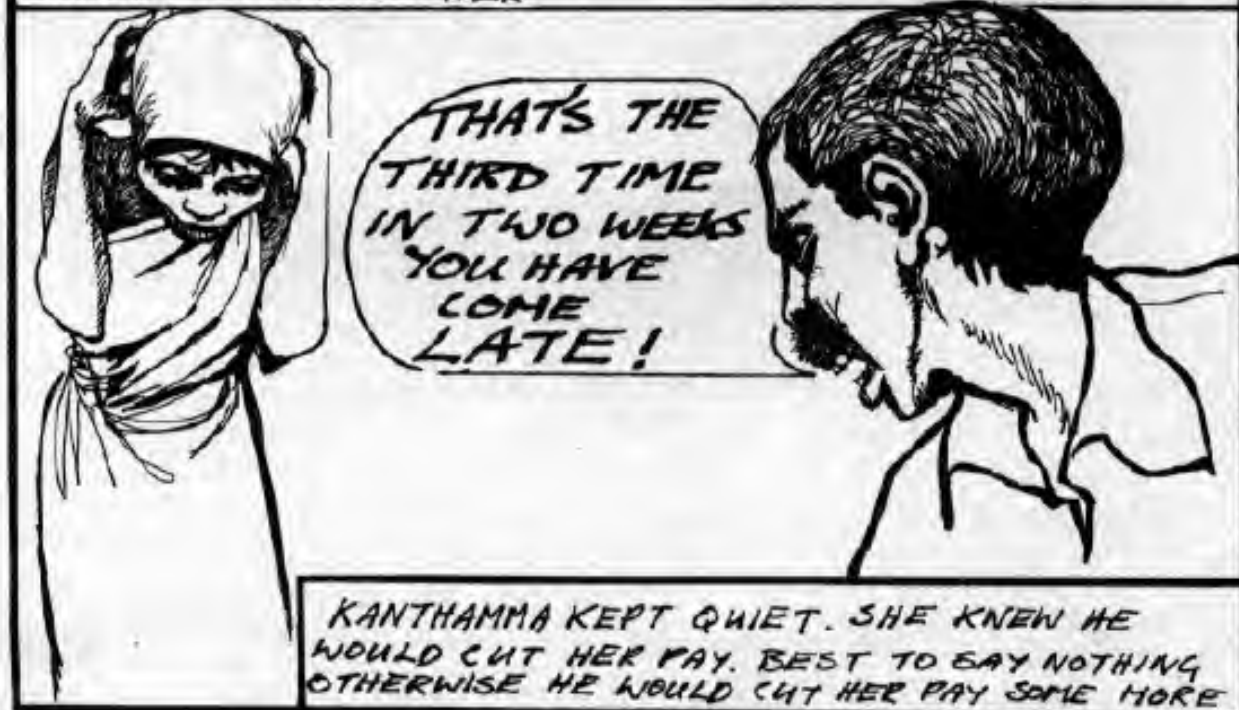


SHE QUICKLY MOVED
TO THE CORNER OF THE
SITE WHERE THE CHILDREN
WERE LEFT.

SHE MADE A LITTLE ROOM FOR THAI. THERE SHE WOULD HAVE TO STAY UNTIL KANTHAMMA FINISHED WORK



SHE WRAPPED A PIECE OF CLOTH AROUND HER HEAD AND STARTED MOVING TOWARDS HER PLACE IN THE LINE BUT NOT BEFORE THE CONTRACTOR CAUGHT SIGHT OF HER





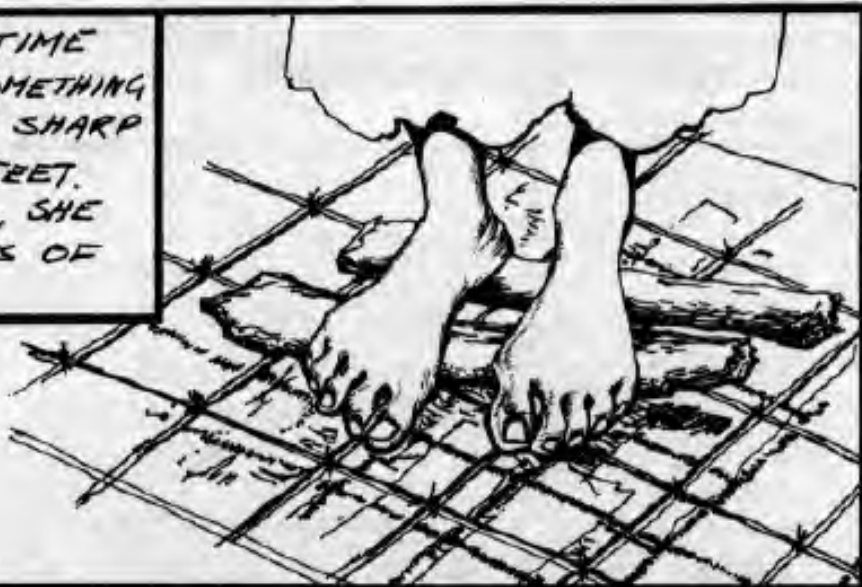
SHE HURRIED TO
HER PLACE ON THE
SCAFFOLDING

ALL THE OTHERS WERE THERE
LAKSHMI, SARDJA, RAMEESA
ANTHONAIMA. THEY LAUGHED
CHEERFULLY WHEN THEY
SAW HER CLIMBING UP THE
SCAFFOLDING.



THERE WAS TIME
FOR SOME MORE
LAUGHTER, AS THE
CEMENT MIXING
MACHINE HAD
BROKEN DOWN. BUT
IT WAS REALLY NO
LAUGHING MATTER
IF THERE WAS NO
CEMENT, THERE
WOULD BE NO MONEY

KANTHAMM HAD TIME
TO SEARCH FOR SOMETHING
TO STAND ON. THE SHARP
WIRES CUT HER FEET.
AFTER SOME TIME, SHE
FOUND TWO PIECES OF
WOOD



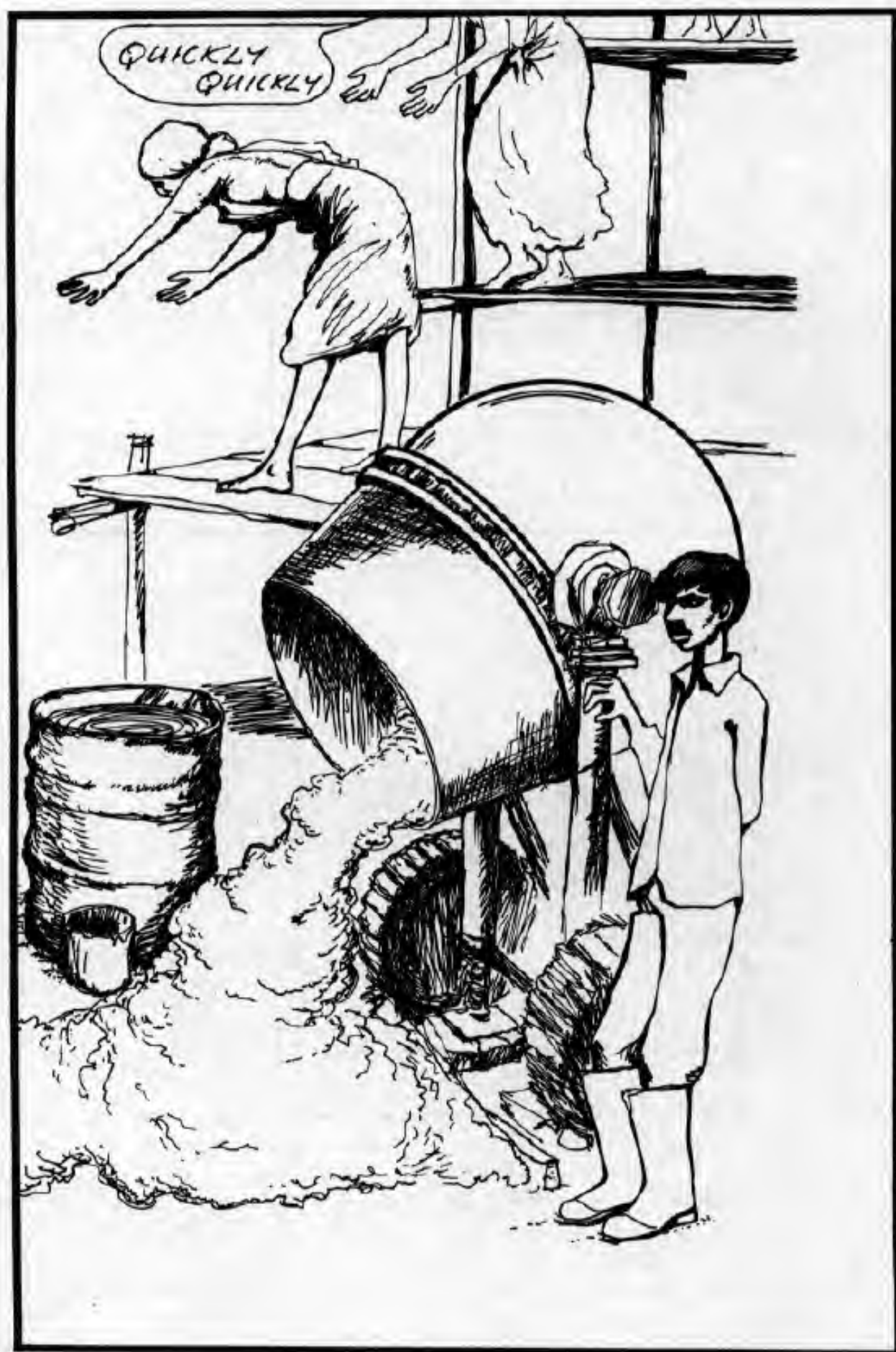
SOON THE CEMENT WAS COMING UP THE LINE AND FAST!



THE MASONS WERE IN A BAD TEMPER.

THE WOMEN MOVED QUICKLY. IF THEY DIDN'T REACH THE QUOTA BY THE END OF THE DAY, THEIR PAY WOULD BE CUT.







THE BANDLI WAS
ALWAYS THERE



SEVEN K.G.'S
WEIGHT



CONTINUOUSLY
MOVING



LIKE
TIME ITSELF



THE
DAY PASSED



MEASURED IN
CEMENT BANDLIS



THERE WAS ALWAYS
ANOTHER ONE.



THE CEMENT KEPT COMING



ENDLESSLY

THE QUOTA WOULD BE REACHED



A FULL DAYS PAY!





RUKMINI CLIMBED
DOWN AND TOOK
KANTHAMMA'S
PLACE

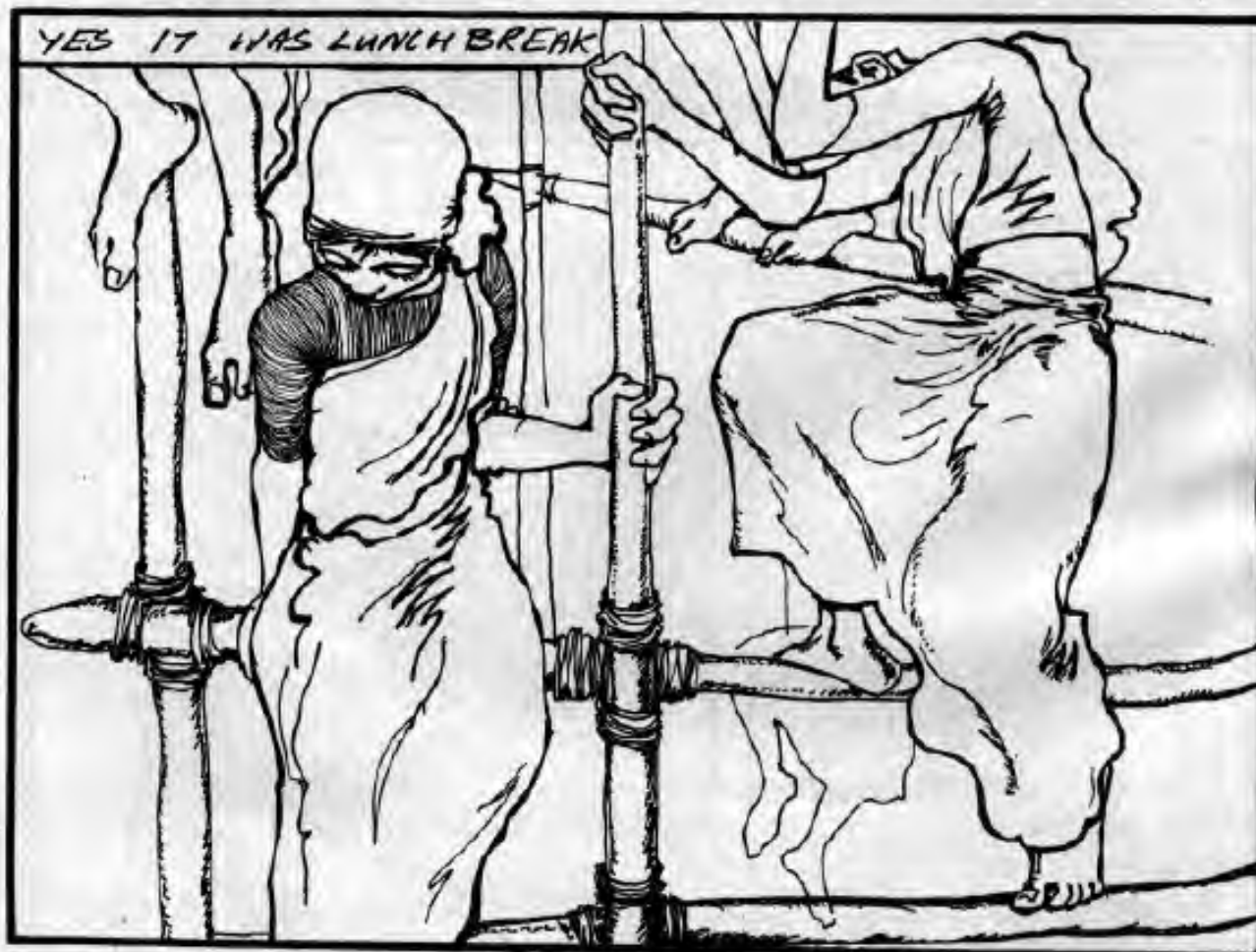
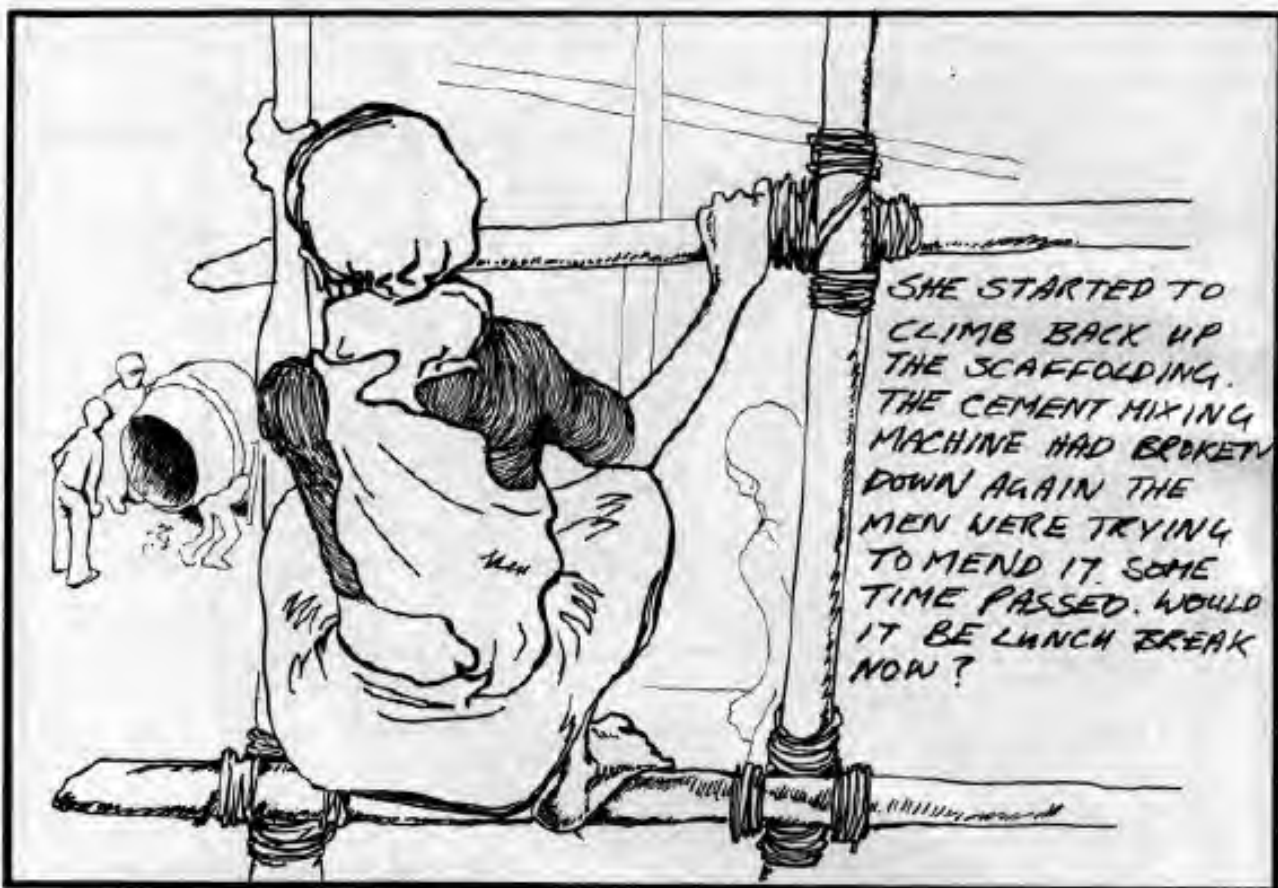


KANTHAMMA CLIMBED
DOWN



AND FED HER BABY THAI





AS THEY HAD LUNCH KANTHAMMA LISTENED TO SAROJA'S STORY.



THAT WOMAN WHOSE PHOTO
WAS IN THE NEWSPAPER. SHE
IS DEAD NOW

SHE HAD JUST GOT MARRIED, BUT HER
HUSBAND WAS NOT HAPPY WITH THE
DOWRY. HE WANTED MORE. HER FAMILY
COULD NOT PAY.

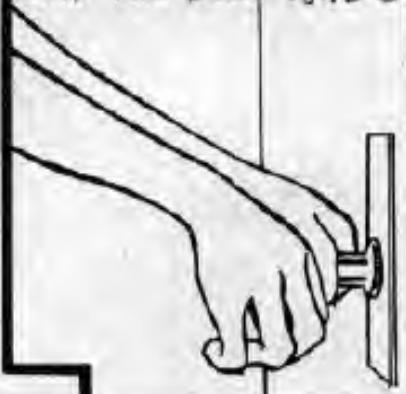


THERE WERE MANY ARGUMENTS BUT IN THE END HE
HAD TO ACCEPT THAT HE WOULD NOT GET ANY MORE MONEY.
THEN THERE WAS AN ACCIDENT.

HER SARI CAUGHT
FIRE AND SHE
COULD NOT PUT
IT OUT



SHE TRIED TO GET OUT
BUT THE DOOR WAS STUCK



THE FLAMES SPREAD QUICKLY



SHE BEAT ON THE DOOR
AND SHOUTED AND
SCREAMED.

BUT NOBODY HEARD
HER.



EVENTUALLY SHE DIED IN THE FLAMES.



BUT PEOPLE SAY
THAT IT WAS NOT AN ACCIDENT.
THEY SAY HE POURED KEROSENE
OVER HER, SET HER ALIGHT AND LOCKED THE
DOOR.

RAMEEZA SPOKE

THERE WAS A WOMAN
WHO USED TO LIVE NEAR
US. SHE HAD ONE BABY. IT
WAS A GIRL CHILD. AFTER
THAT SHE BECAME SICK. SHE
WENT TO THE HOSPITAL. THEY
EXAMINED HER.



THEY SAID SHE COULD NOT
HAVE ANY MORE BABIES



HER HUSBAND WAS ANGRY



I WANTED YOU
TO PRODUCE A SON
FOR ME. NOW IT
SEEMS THAT YOU
CANNOT DO
THAT!



YOU ARE NO MORE USE
AS A WIFE TO ME. LEAVE MY
HOUSE, TAKE YOUR GIRL CHILD
WITH YOU AND FIND SOME WAY
TO DISPOSE OF YOURSELF
AND THE CHILD.



THAT SAME NIGHT SHE
LEFT THE HOUSE AND WENT TO
THE WELL. THE DEEPEST WELL IN
THE DISTRICT



HOLDING THE BABY
TIGHTLY, SHE JUMPED
IN, TO HER DEATH

THE POLICE SAY IT WAS SUICIDE



AND IF SHE GOES FROM HIS
HOUSE ? WHO WILL TAKE HER IN ?
ANSWER - NO BODY. SHE MIGHT
AS WELL KILL HERSELF

DONT YOU THINK THAT WOMEN
HAVE A RIGHT BE TREATED LIKE HUMAN
BEINGS WITH LIVES OF THEIR OWN

COME !

IT WAS THE CONTRACTOR.

LUNCH WAS OVER, THEY WENT BACK TO WORK



AT FIRST THE WORK WAS HARD. KANTHAMMA'S ARMS WERE ACHING. ONE LORRY LOAD OF PAVING SLABS TO BE MOVED. AFTER SOME TIME SHE GOT USED TO IT



RUKMINI TALKED







BUT KANTHAMMA THOUGHT
CAREFULLY ABOUT ALL
THAT RUKMINI HAD
SAID TO HER



THE REST OF THE DAY SEEMED TO PASS SO SLOWLY, UNTIL AT LAST, THE GOOD NEWS CAME

OKAY EVERYBODY
THE CASH HAS ARRIVED

ONE WEEKS PAY DUE. THAT
WAS SOMETHING WORTH WAITING FOR



SO KANTHAMMA,
YOU WILL SEE THAT
MANY OF YOURS
TONIGHT, FOR
SURE!

HER HUSBAND KANAPPEN
WAS AN ALCOHOLIC AND
NOT OFTEN AT HOME

THEY JOINED THE PAY QUEUE AND WATCHED THE MEN GETTING PAID



SEE HOW
MUCH THEY
GET PAID!

NEARLY TWICE
AS MUCH AS
US!

JUST THEN, THERE WAS A DISTURBANCE FURTHER
UP THE PAY QUEUE

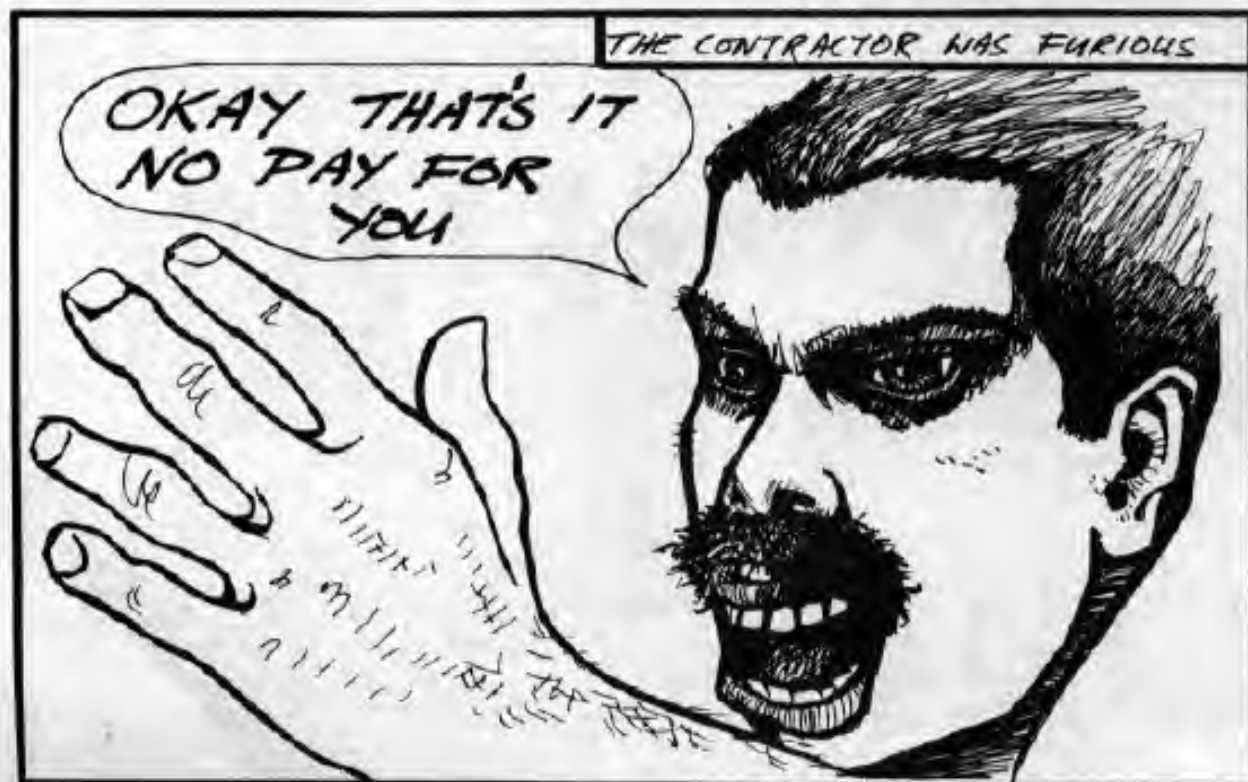


AI-YO!



IT WAS RUKMINI.
THE CONTRACTOR HAD
CASUALLY STROKED HER
BACK AND TOLD HER
THAT AS SHE WAS A
LOW WOMAN, SHE HAD
NO RIGHT TO OBJECT

RUKMINI SPAT AT HIM



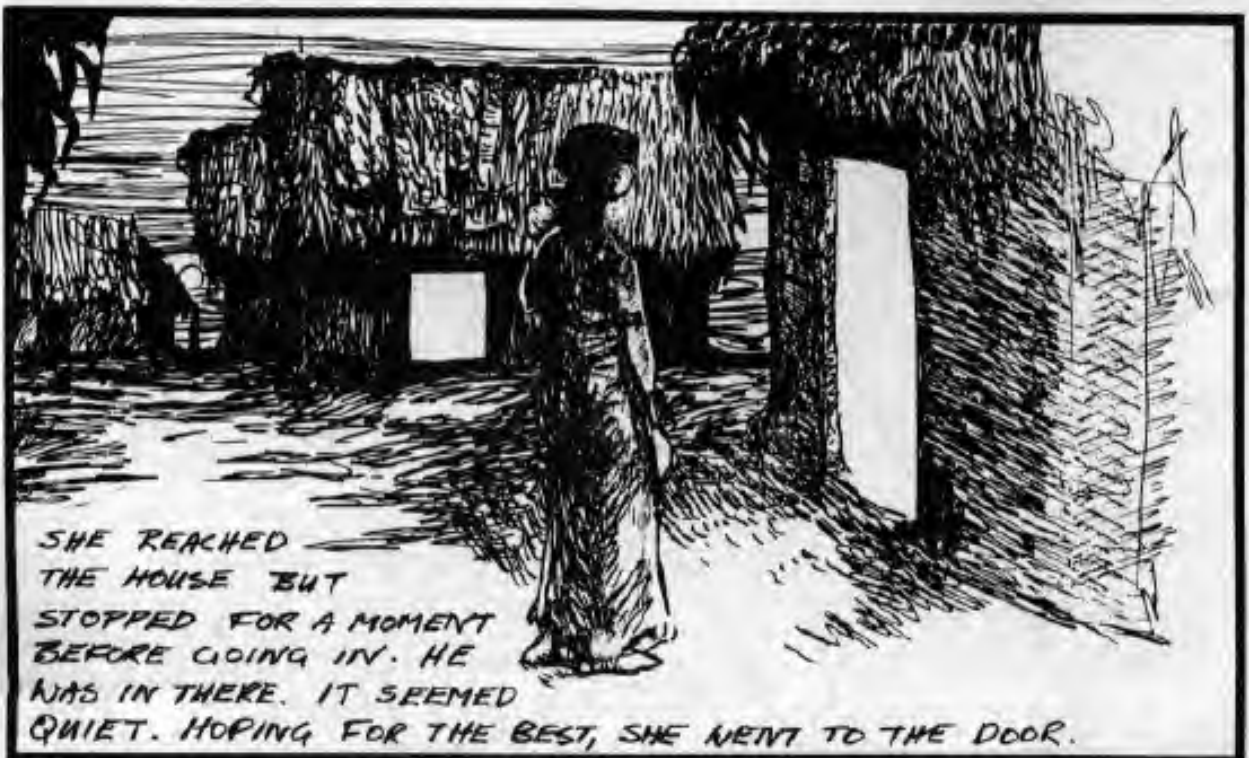
THE CONTRACTOR WAS FURIOUS

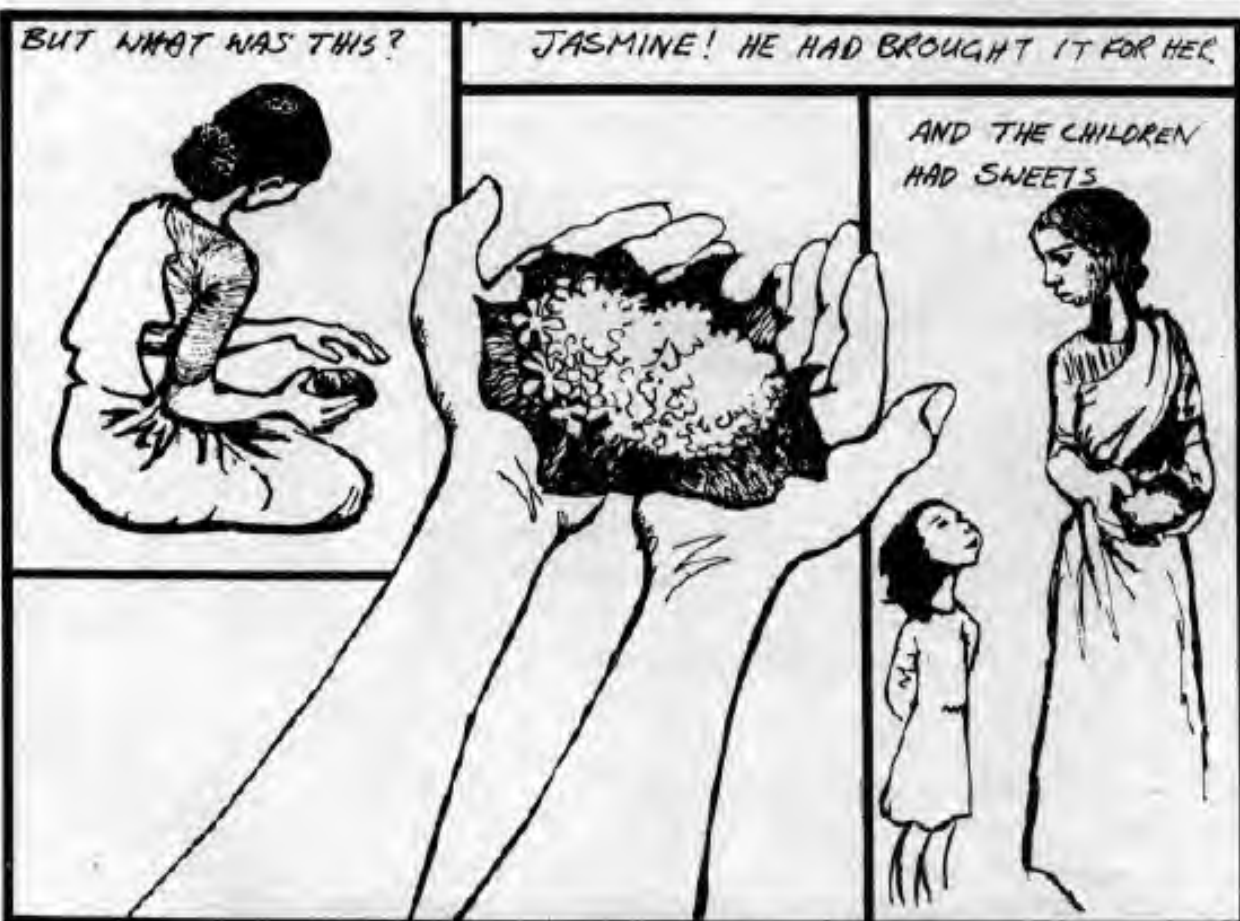
OKAY THAT'S IT
NO PAY FOR
YOU



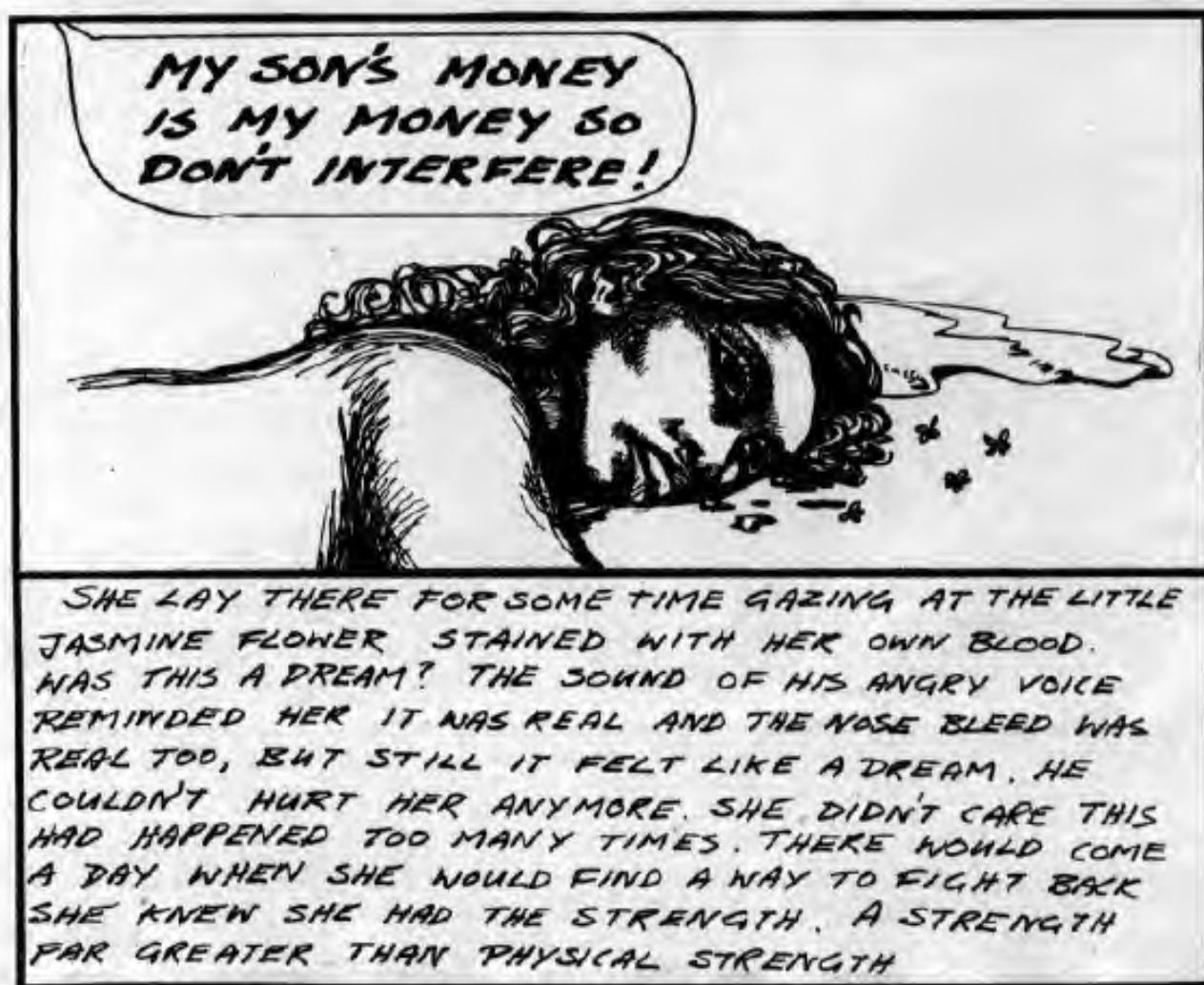


SHE STOPPED TO PICK UP A FEW PROVISIONS AND SOME SWEETS FOR THE CHILDREN. LAKSHMIAMMA WAS THERE









SHE LAY THERE FOR SOME TIME GAZING AT THE LITTLE JASMINE FLOWER STAINED WITH HER OWN BLOOD. WAS THIS A DREAM? THE SOUND OF HIS ANGRY VOICE REMINDED HER IT WAS REAL AND THE NOSE BLEED WAS REAL TOO, BUT STILL IT FELT LIKE A DREAM. HE COULDN'T HURT HER ANYMORE. SHE DIDN'T CARE THIS HAD HAPPENED TOO MANY TIMES. THERE WOULD COME A DAY WHEN SHE WOULD FIND A WAY TO FIGHT BACK SHE KNEW SHE HAD THE STRENGTH. A STRENGTH FAR GREATER THAN PHYSICAL STRENGTH